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The three great classical civilizations of Rome, Han China, and Gupta India collapsed or declined. All three suffered from invasions by nomads from central Asia who took advantage of internal imperial weaknesses. Rome also endured Germanic incursions, and the western portion of its empire lost more of its earlier achievements than other civilizations. The general collapse forms a significant break in world history. Many components of the classical achievement survived the period of decline, and new forms appeared as civilizations altered to meet changing conditions.

The Decline of Civilization and the Rise of Religions. New periods in history are infrequent; they must be defined carefully. At the close of the classical period the decline of empires and the rise of religions marks a new periodization.

Defining the New Period. Three related shifts must occur to mark a new period in world history. Some civilizations must divide in new ways, altering the world map. Different kinds of contacts must be established among civilization areas. New parallelisms must arise in the patterns displayed by major civilizations. The fall of the great empires meets the requirements. Cultural and political boundaries shifted in India and the Mediterranean world. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam spread widely. The Islamic world replaced India as the most expansive civilization.

Surge in the Great Religions. The major world religions - Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam - rose or expanded as the great empires declined. Hinduism continued its evolution. Political and economic instability, plus the impact of devastating epidemics, prompted individuals to seek new spiritual answers.

Upheavals in Eastern and Southern Asia. The key transition in Asian civilizations came with the decline of the Han in China, the Gupta in India, and nomadic pressures.

Decline and Fall in Han China. The Han dynasty appeared to recover vitality during the 2nd century CE, but poor rulers and popular unrest fueled by landlord exploitation culminated in revolution. Daoist leaders, the Yellow Turbans, in 184 CE began a period of disorder ending with

the fall of the Han in 220. China split into three unstable kingdoms, with southern regions pulling apart from the north. The landowning class operated beyond government control. There were no firm dynasties for 350 years. The instability turned interest to the spiritual solace and cultural cohesion offered by Buddhism. Brought from India by merchants and missionaries, Buddhism overcame Daoist attacks to spread throughout China by the 5th century CE. In the process Chinese cultural values, including subordination of women, were incorporated into Buddhism. Its growing influence stimulated thought among Daoists; they formalized their religion and adopted beliefs about achieving immortality through good works. Confucianism lost ground. Political revival occurred at the end of the 6th century when the Sui dynasty reunited China. They collapsed in 618 and were replaced by the Tang. During these troubled years old values survived and China retained greater homogeneity than other civilizations.

The End of the Guptas: Decline in India.

Chandraguta II brought the Gupta dynasty to the high point of its rule in the early 5th century CE. Under his successors the decentralized Gupta structure failed to repel Hun invasions. By 500 the Huns controlled northwestern India; the Gupta collapsed in 550. One final effort to revive the dynasty when a Gupta descendant, Harsha, briefly built a loose state in the north during the first half of the 7th century. India then divided into regional dynasties ruled by princes called Rajput. Buddhism steadily declined before Hinduism. Worship of the mother goddess Devi spread widely. The caste system strengthened,

assimilating invaders, and extending to southern India. The economy flourished, with new trade links opening to southern India and Southeast Asia. An important threat to Indian cultural continuity came from the 7th century expansion of Islam as Muslim invaders entered northwest India and won converts. By the 8th century Arab traders gained control of Indian Ocean commerce.

The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

The decline of the Roman Empire was more disruptive than that of the Han or Gupta.

The Causation of Roman Decline. The Roman Empire, for many reasons, was in decline from the late 2nd century CE. A shrinking population hindered army recruiting. In political life emperors had lesser ability. Disputes over succession led to continual army intervention. Tax revenues fell during hard economic times. Pervasive despondency among individuals meant a loss of meaning in life. Expansion of the empire ended after 180, thus closing the sources of slave labor. Although labor policies on mines and estates were restructured, the economic system lost vitality. Environmental deterioration in North Africa diminished grain supplies and tax revenues. Recurring plagues further decimated population and disrupted economic life. Germanic soldiers had to be hired to defend frontiers. In the midst of these problems Rome's upper classes turned from political service to pleasure-seeking lives. Cultural activity, except for works by Christian writers, decayed.

The Process of Roman Decline. As central authority declined, farmers, seeking protection, clustered around large landlords. The political decentralization was most pronounced in the western empire. Political power passed to landlords and the economy contracted. Tax revenues fell, trade declined, and cities shrank in size. Some emperors tried to restore central authority. Diocletian (284-305) improved administration and tax collecting, and increased controls on the economy. Constantine (312-337) established a

second capital at Constantinople and accepted Christianity. The measures did not restore vitality to the empire as a whole. The eastern half flourished, but the western did not. Economic regulation curbed initiative and lowered production. Many overburdened peasants welcomed the changes brought by the Germanic invasions of the 5th century. The last western Roman emperor was removed in 476.

Results of the Fall of Rome. Rome's collapse ended Mediterranean unity. Three zones emerged, each later producing distinct civilizations. The northeastern part of the empire did not fall. The vibrant, artistically creative, and commercially active Byzantine Empire incorporated Hellenistic and Roman patterns. A 2nd zone, in North Africa and along the Mediterranean's southeastern shores, suffered serious disruption. Temporary regional kingdoms emerged. Although Christianity spread, differing interpretations split its unity. Eventually North Africa fell to Islam. In the 3rd zone, the western and northern portions of the empire, the level of civilization declined. Regional Germanic kingdoms appeared. The only vital force was Christianity, but it was not able to prevent the decline of civilization.

In Depth: The Problem of Decline and Fall.

Historians long have sought the causes of the decline or fall of great civilizations. Moral failure often has been awarded importance for Rome's collapse, but the explanation often is stimulated by anxieties of analysts worrying about the course of their own civilization. More realistically, it appears that civilizations naturally rise and fall as part of an inevitable process influenced by the changes occurring in their societies. And, importantly, the decline or collapse of a civilization does not mean that its contribution disappears.

The Development and Spread of World Religions.

The decline of the classical civilizations contributed to the growth of the three great world religions. Buddhism,

Christianity, and Islam became the only religions spreading far beyond a single region. Hinduism and Daoism, remained regional religions, but gained new followers.

Christianity and Buddhism Compared. Both religions stressed otherworldliness, produced important monastic movements, and offered the possibility of an afterlife. Chinese Buddhism, called Mahayana, emphasized Buddha as a savior god similar to Christ. Each religion accepted a role for holy men - among Buddhists called bodhisattvas - aiding believers to gain holiness. There were differences. Christianity, the heir to the legacy of Mediterranean religions and Roman traditions, emphasized church organization, gave more value to missionary activity, and claimed possession of exclusive truth. Christianity began as a Jewish reform movement, only gradually turning to missionary activity. The Christians believed that there was a single god who loved humanity, that virtuous life should be devoted to his worship, and that Christ's sacrifice permitted attainment of an afterlife. The message, its travels facilitated by Roman unity, satisfied unfilled spiritual needs present in the deteriorating empire. Under Paul, Christianity became a separate religion open to all.

Christianity Gains Ground. Despite competition from Eastern mystery religions and government persecution, by the 4th century Christianity had won over about 10% of the Roman empire's population. Emperor Constantine converted and made Christianity an accepted faith. Rulers intervened in church affairs, particularly in the eastern empire where government remained strong. In the disorganized west bishops created a centralized church organization that endured when the western empire collapsed. There were many doctrinal controversies. The Council of Nicea (325 CE) demonstrated the importance of unified doctrine to Christianity. It ruled in favor of the Nicene creed, an interpretation holding that the one Christian god had three persons.

Strong leaders assisted the consolidation of Christianity. Leo I clearly established the papacy as the supreme religious authority in western Europe. Augustine made major contributions in formulating a theology that incorporated elements of classical philosophy. Holy male and female mystics flourished, a tendency disciplined by the institution of monasticism. Benedict of Nursia created the Benedictine Rule for monks in 6th century Italy; Basil organized eastern empire monasticism in the 4th century. Christianity continued to appeal to all classes, especially to the poor and women. It promoted a new culture different from that of the classical world by its beliefs in spiritual equality and otherworldly emphasis. The state was accepted, but made second to religion. Greater emphasis was awarded to disciplined work. Classical values retained included philosophical themes, architectural styles, and the Latin language in the west and Greek in the east. Monastic libraries preserved classical literature.

The New Religious Map. The rise and spread of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam over many centuries incorporated most of the inhabitants of the civilized world. Numerous peoples in different societies left old beliefs and turned to concentration on a single divine force and a hope for an afterlife. The world religions, a new force in world history, provided beliefs that transcended political entities.

Conclusion: In the Wake of Decline and Fall. By 600 CE the major civilizations had altered in permanent ways. China maintained political cohesion; along with India it preserved much cultural cohesion. The Roman Empire in contrast disintegrated, and successor civilizations did not restore geographical unity or a unified classical culture. Nomadic invaders both toppled empires and spread new ideas and techniques. Missionaries brought Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam into new regions.